

November 14, 2005: USCIRF releases "Thank you, Father Kim Il Sung": Eyewitness Accounts of Severe Violations of Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion in North Korea At Capitol Hill press conference with Congressional Members

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Anne Johnson, Director of Communications, (202) 523-3240, ext. 27 WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) will be joined tomorrow by Congressman Frank Wolf (R-VA) and Congressman Christopher Smith (R-NJ) for the release of the USCIRF study "Thank you, Father Kim Il Sung": Eyewitness Accounts of Severe Violations of Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion in North Korea, FULL REPORT (PDF 1.7MB), TEXT ONLY - faster download (PDF 672KB), at an on-the-record press conference on Capitol Hill in the Rayburn House Office Building, Room 2172, from 3:00-4:00 p.m. The press conference is open to members of the media and the public. The Commission's study, led by David Hawk, distinguished author of *The Hidden Gulag: Exposing North Korea's Prison Camps*, presents evidence based on extensive, in-depth interviews with North Korean refugees and escapees on the policies used by the North Korean government to stamp out religious faith and practice, including eyewitness accounts of public executions of religious believers and indoctrination sessions at "Kim Il Sung Revolutionary Research Centers." "Thank you, Father Kim Il Sung" is the first phrase taught by North Korean parents to their children. From cradle to grave, North Korean citizens are surrounded by the all-encompassing presence of the "Great Leader" and his son, the "Dear Leader," Kim Jong Il, and their Juche ideology and personality cult. The Kim dynasty is much more than just an authoritarian political regime. It holds itself to be the ultimate source of power, virtue, spiritual wisdom and truth for its citizens. Interviewees in the study talk about the portrayal of religion as evil in North Korea's education system and media, and the reported 450,000 "Kim Il Sung Revolutionary Research Centers" at which North Koreans are required to attend at least weekly sessions for instruction, inspiration, and self-criticism. Heterodoxy and dissent are repressed quickly and efficiently, with punishment meted out to three generations of the dissident's family. "Thank you, Father Kim Il Sung" tells the story of the systematic denigration of North Korea's once vibrant religious life, the conscious attempts to establish a quasi-religious cult of personality centered on Kim Il Sung and his son Kim Jong Il, and the survival of limited religious activity in North Korea. "The Commission's study - the first of its kind by a U.S. government agency - reveals that Kim Jong Il fears that cross-border contacts will puncture the hermetic seal that he has tried, with considerable success, to place around North Korea - the seal that preserves the Kim dynasty and its 'divinity.' Anything that casts doubt on the beneficence or omnipotence of the 'Dear Leader' has to be repressed," said USCIRF Chair Michael Cromartie. "There is interesting evidence that some North Koreans are testing prohibitions against religious activity. That is why there is renewed government interest in ensuring that North Koreans coming back from China are not 'infected' either by South Korean democracy or any form of religious belief. Several of those interviewed for this study claim that faith in the "Dear Leader" is not as strong as it was before the famine of the 1990s, having been shaken by the crushing economic and other deprivations in North Korea. Fortune-telling, a remnant of Korean Shamanism, is also resurfacing." Continued Cromartie, "As the international community deals with North Korea's nuclear aspirations, human rights objectives should not be put aside. Negotiations to end nuclear proliferation should include issues such as family reunification, abductions, rule-of-law development, market reforms, religious freedom, needs-based food distribution, and economic development. Toward that end, the Commission's study includes recommendations for U.S. policy." Commission recommendations for U.S. policy include that the U.S. government should: Work with regional and European allies to fashion a comprehensive plan for security concerns on the Korean peninsula-modeled after the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe-as suggested in Sec. 106 of the North Korean Human Rights Act; consider, with this model, expanding the Six-Party talks on nuclear security to include separate discussions on issues related to human rights and human security, using ongoing security negotiations to press North Korea for improvements in areas of mutual concern, including monitoring of humanitarian aid, resettlement of refugees, family reunifications, the end of abductions, and other pressing human rights issues, including religious freedom; Ensure that the Special Envoy on Human Rights in North Korea, as appointed by President Bush and according to the Envoy's mandate in the North Korean Human Rights Act of 2004, retains full authority to move forward on assistance to North Korean refugees, new human rights and democracy programming, and expanded public diplomacy programs; Urge the Chinese government to uphold its international obligations to protect asylum seekers, by (1) working with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to establish a mechanism to confer at least temporary asylum on those seeking such protection; (2) providing the UNHCR with unrestricted access to interview North Korean nationals in China; and (3) ensuring that any migrants who are being returned pursuant to any bilateral agreement are not potential asylum seekers refouled in violation of China's obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol; and Continue to use appropriate international fora to condemn egregious human rights abuses in North Korea and seek protections and redress for victims, including by co-sponsoring and working for passage of a resolution on North Korean human rights practices at appropriate UN bodies. "Thank you, Father Kim Il Sung": Eyewitness Accounts of Severe Violations of Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion in North Korea will be available on the Commission's web site at www.uscifr.gov at 3:00 p.m. on November 15 and may also be obtained by contacting the Commission's Communications Department at communications@uscifr.gov (202) 523-3240, ext. 26 or 27.

Michael Cromartie, Chair

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